

Oct. 27 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 2000

The President. Well, the answer to the last question is, I have not made a decision yet. But I was very pleased with the reception that Secretary Albright received, and I hope that the North Koreans were pleased with the reception that General Cho received here. And we're talking about those things.

If I could just take a minute, I think it's important for the American people to understand just how far this issue has come and yet what is still out there. When I became President, and I began to get—after the election, just as the new President-elect will find, I got all these briefings, and we went through all the national security stuff. The general consensus was that the most dangerous problem I was facing in late 1992 was North Korea's nuclear program and that it could lead to the development of not only nuclear weapons, which would imperil the Korean Peninsula and our then about 40,000 soldiers there—we have slightly fewer now—but that in the worst of all worlds, they might develop nuclear weapons and sell them to others, along with missiles, which would be devastating to the whole future of arms control.

And what happened? We got an agreement to end the nuclear program. The Japanese supported it. The South Koreans strongly supported it. We got other countries to kick in a little

money. We've worked on it. We've continued to negotiate over missile testing and technology with them. And we refused to have an independent relationship except on arms control issues, in the absence of some improving relationship between North and South; the present President, Kim Dae-jung, gets elected in South Korea, breaks this long icy relationship, justifiably wins the Nobel Peace Prize. I was elated for him. And then they come here; we go there. So let me just remind you, we are a long, long way in the right direction, compared to where we were back in January of '93.

But we still have substantial concerns in the missile area, as you pointed out. We're working on it, and that's all I think I should say now. We're working on it, and I haven't made a decision on the trip.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:10 in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Ehud Barak of Israel; Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority; Republican Presidential candidate Gov. George W. Bush of Texas; former Chief of Intelligence Vladmiro Montesinos and President Alberto Fujimori of Peru; National Defense Vice Chairman Cho Myong-nok of North Korea; and President Kim Dae-jung of South Korea.

Remarks to African-American Community Leaders

October 27, 2000

Thank you very much, Secretary Herman, and thank you for the wonderful, wonderful job you have done as Secretary of Labor. I want to thank the others who are here from the White House today, Minyon Moore, Mary Beth Cahill, Ben Johnson; Alvin Brown, the vice chair of our Community Empowerment Board that the Vice President has done such a great job leading in the last 8 years; Lorraine Miller, the executive director of the Community Empowerment Board; Jena Roscoe, the director of African-American outreach; John Johnson of the NAACP; Norman Hill of the A. Philip Randolph Institute; Wade Henderson; Yvonne Scruggs-Leftwich; and of course, my great friend Rep-

resentative Eddie Bernice Johnson from Texas. Thank you for being here.

Thank you all for joining me today. I wanted to talk with you a little bit about the upcoming election and the profound importance that I believe it has for all of you and for all of those about whom you care.

You know, first, let me say I feel so much gratitude as I approach the end of my service as President. If anybody had told me when we started that we would end with 22 million new jobs and the highest homeownership in history and the highest rate of business formation in history and the lowest minority unemployment in history, the lowest recorded African-American poverty rate in history, the lowest child poverty

rate in 20 years, lowest welfare rolls in 32 years—cut in half—the lowest crime rate in 26 years, a reduction in the number of people without health insurance for the first time in a dozen years, record rates of college-going—all these things that have happened—I would have been very grateful. And I am grateful.

But today what I want to say to you is that the country is in good shape. We're moving in the right direction. But we are now in a position that we were not in 8 years ago, where we have to ask ourselves not what do we do to get out of the ditch, but what do we do to build the future of our dreams for our children?

And we're in a position to choose, which is what voting ought to be about. I've done my best to try to urge the American people and all the political actors to make this a very positive election but a vigorous debate. And they're having their debate, and I don't have to contribute to that, but everybody knows how I feel. But I want to talk about what all this means.

First of all, as Alexis said, we've been driven here for 8 years by some pretty simple ideas. One is that there ought to be opportunity for every responsible citizen. And that meant that we had to create the conditions and give people the tools to make the most of their own lives. The other is that we ought to build one America across all the lines that divide us, which meant that we had to take exceptional efforts to make sure that there was participation and empowerment. And finally, I have sought to create in our country the capacity to lead the world for peace and freedom in the post-cold-war era, recognizing that the world is growing ever more interdependent and that every part of the world is important to us.

So we've worked hard at all this. Alexis talked about the economy and the participation of African-Americans in the administration. Since I've been here, we've had—of my total appointees—12 percent of the Cabinet, 14 percent of the total appointees, and 17 percent of the Federal judicial nominees.

But we've worked hard to affect America at the grassroots level. That's what the empowerment zone program is about, that the Vice President has done such a good job of running these last 8 years. That's what the new markets initiative we're desperately trying to pass through the Congress in the closing days, to give people the same incentives to invest in un-

derdeveloped areas in America we give people to invest in underdeveloped areas in Latin America and Africa and Asia and other parts of the world. And I feel very good about that.

But I'm grateful that we've got childhood immunizations over 90 percent for the first time in the history of our Nation. I'm also grateful for the progress in education. We had a theory that—we're only spending about 7 percent of the total education budget. It's a State constitutional responsibility, a local administrative responsibility, but a national priority. And when I came to the Presidency, I had already been seriously involved in education for about 14 years. And I wanted to put our money—first, I wanted to get the money up, because we were down below 6 percent and heading south, and so we wanted to turn that around. And even as we got rid of the deficit and turned a \$290 billion deficit into a \$230 billion surplus, we doubled our investment in education and training. A lot of that money has been in Secretary Herman's shop.

But when we looked at the schools, what we wanted to do was to focus on what the research and the educators say worked: to get high standards, genuine accountability, and then support for the schools and the teachers and the kids and the parents to succeed, to meet the standards. And we've worked very hard. We've expanded preschool. We've invested more in teacher training. We're putting—I believe that we have gotten an agreement for the third year of our 100,000 teacher initiative to have smaller classes in the early grades.

The Vice President worked hard to get something called the E-rate in the telecommunications bill so that all of our schools could afford to log on to the Internet. Since we started this project in 1994, the number of schools hooked to the Internet have gone from 14 to 95 percent, the number of classrooms from 3 percent to 65 percent. So we're moving in the right direction.

The number of States with really good State-based standards in core curriculums has gone from about 3 percent—excuse me, gone from 11 States or 14 States to 49 States. And we began a few years ago to say to the States that get Federal money, "Look, you've got to identify these failing schools—identify them and do something to turn them around." And we wanted to have a tougher accountability standard, but so far we haven't persuaded the Congress

to do that. But all over the country, schools are turning around.

I was in a school in Harlem the other day, that 2 years ago had 80 percent of the kids doing reading and math below grade level, to just 2 years later, 74 percent of the kids doing reading, math at or above grade level. I've seen it in predominantly African-American schools, predominantly Hispanic schools. I've seen it in mixed race schools. I was in a predominantly white rural school in western Kentucky a few months ago, where 3 years ago they had 12 percent of the kids reading at or above grade level; it's 57 percent now. They had 5 percent of the kids doing math at or above grade level; it's 70 percent now. They had zero kids doing science at or above grade level; it's 63 percent now. So this is happening all over America, and I'm grateful for that.

I'm grateful that we passed the biggest expansion in college aids, from Pell grants to the HOPE scholarships to work-study programs to the AmeriCorps program, since the GI bill. And we've got college-going at an all-time high. A couple of years ago, for the first time in history, the African-American high school graduation rate equaled the white graduation rate for the first time in our history. And over the last 6 years, the taking of advanced placement courses by our high school students has increased over 50 percent, but it's up 300 percent for Latino kids and 500 percent for African-American kids. This is a good thing.

So I say all this to say the country is going in the right direction. But the bedrock, the thing that made so much of the rest of it possible—and I didn't talk much about the crime rate. It's gone down every year—more police, more prevention. The after-school programs have a lot to do with that. We were serving no kids with Federal money in after-school programs when I became President. Today, we're serving 800,000, and if our budget prevails in the closing days of this Congress, we'll go to 1.6 million children served in after-school programs—very important.

But let me come back to basics. When I became President, the economy was in trouble, and we were paralyzed by high interest rates and a crushing annual deficit which had quadrupled the debt in 4 years. So as we look ahead, I think we have to say our work is not done. And I would just like to mention four things

that I think are important, profoundly important to the American people, without regard to race.

Number one, we've got to keep this prosperity going. And my view is, that means we ought to say—that means, first, we've got to keep paying down the debt until we get out of debt, and that will keep interest rates down. We'll figure out what it costs to do that. Then what's left, we can spend. And we'll spend some of it with a tax cut, but a good deal of it to invest in education and health care, in the environment, in our national security, and in our future.

Now, that's basically the program that our party and our nominees have laid out. Pay the debt down; keep interest rates down. Take what's left; have a tax cut we can afford; focus it on the needs of middle class people for college education, for child care, for long-term care for elderly and disabled people, for retirement savings, and for lower income working people with a bunch of kids that need more help than we're giving them. But then invest, continue to invest in these other areas. Now, one virtue of that is that if the money doesn't come in, you don't have to spend it. But if you give it all away in a tax cut on the front end, it's not there, whether it comes in or not.

But I just want to say, I believe that the progressive party in America ought to be for getting America out of debt for the first time since 1835, when Andrew Jackson was President. Why? Because it gets the interest rates down. We believe it will keep interest rates about a percent lower than if you take the alternative course, which is a \$1.3 trillion tax cut, which gives you a \$300 billion extra interest bill—because you cut interest payments if you cut the debt—and a \$1 trillion Social Security privatization program and a \$500 billion spending package. If you have \$2 trillion in projected surpluses—and that's really bigger than it's going to be, but let's just assume that—and you spend 1.3 on a tax cut and 300 billion on interest and 500 billion on spending—with me so far? That's 2.1—and a trillion dollars on privatizing Social Security, this is—forget about all the zeros. Three-point-one is bigger than 2. You're in deficit.

You know, life has been good to a lot of you in this room, and you've worked hard. And some of you in this room would be better off the day after with that program—people like lawyer Latham there, you know? [Laughter] But look, we've tried it that way, and all I can tell

you is, if you keep interest rates lower, that's better for everybody, including the well-off. And it keeps this economy going, and it makes everything else possible.

One percent lower interest rates, which is what you get if you stay out of deficit and keep paying that debt down, one percent a year over 10 years is worth the following: \$390 billion in lower home mortgage payments; \$30 billion in lower car payments; \$15 billion in lower college loan payments. Never mind—now, that's a \$435 billion tax cut in the form of lower mortgages. Never mind the lower interest rates on credit cards and the lower business loan rate, which means easier to start a small business, more business expansion, more jobs, higher income, and a better stock market.

So, number one is, what's the best way to keep the prosperity going? Question number two, how do you build on the progress of the last 8 years with a cleaner environment, with a lower crime rate, with the welfare rolls cut in half, with the schools improving, the college-going rate going up, the number of people without health insurance going down? How do you do that?

Well, I believe you have to have some funds to invest in helping working people whose children we're now insuring get health insurance, too; helping people who leave the work force when they're 55 and don't have health insurance anymore buy into Medicare; in adding this prescription drug benefit for seniors; in funding the college tuition program Vice President Gore has recommended, tuition deduction for college. I think these are very important—and continuing to invest until all our kids who need preschool and after-school have it; continuing to invest because you're going to have 2 million teachers retire over the next 10 years, and we've got to replace them. And if we keep unemployment low and the economy high, we'll have to pay them more, do signing bonuses, do a lot of work on that. So how do you build on the progress? I think you don't just stay still, but the question is, are you going to change in the same direction you're moving in or take a different direction?

So, question number one, how do you keep the prosperity going? Question number two, how do you build on the progress? Question number three, how do you keep building one America?

We've come a long way, but we still have real challenges. We have to figure out a way to work through this racial profiling issue, to stop it without in any way giving anybody the impression that we want any criminal to get away with anything. That's not what this is about. We all want strong law enforcement; we want a safe society. We like the fact that the crime rate is going down, but we don't like people being targeted just because of who they are, rather than whether there is a reasonable suspicion that they've committed a crime.

How do you deal with the fact that we still have a lot of hate crimes in America, based not just on race but on sexual orientation, even a few every year based on disability? Do we need a hate crimes bill? I think we do.

How do you deal with the fact that even though I have named 62 African-American Federal judges—3 times as many as the previous two administrations combined—we still don't have a black judge on the fourth circuit, where there are more black Americans than any other Federal circuit in America?

How do we keep closing the digital divide? It's still out there, within our country and beyond our borders. And I could just go on and on and on. We have big challenges in our continuing effort to build one America.

How are we going to do more to guarantee equal pay for women? I don't know if you saw the news story today, but now married couples with children where both the man and the woman are in the work force are now a majority of married couples—now a majority. Fifty-nine percent of the women in America with a child one year or younger are in the work force now—59 percent. And yet, there is still a yawning pay gap, which is not only bad for women; it's bad for the men that are married to them. *[Laughter]* I mean, this is not a good deal here.

You know, I came late to this issue because my wife made more money than me until I got elected President. *[Laughter]* And now I'm going to let her try public service—I hope—and I'll see if I can make more money. *[Laughter]* I want you to laugh and have a good time, but this is serious. How are we going to build one America?

So, one, how do you keep the prosperity going? Two, how do you build on the progress we're making in every aspect of our social life? Three, how do we keep building one America?

Four, how do we create a world that is safer for our children, more just, more decent, and more prosperous?

For me, passing the trade bill for Africa and the Caribbean is an important part of that. For me, immigration fairness is important to that. For me, this debt relief initiative, which I am profoundly grateful—I must say, I’ve tried to emphasize to people, the parties do not fight over everything in Washington. This election ought to be about where our honest differences are. But one of the most moving things to me in this congressional session has been, we actually reached a bipartisan agreement to have America pay its fair share of relieving the debt of the poorest countries in the world that agree to give honest government and put the savings into education, health care, and development. This is a huge deal.

But we’ve got to keep building that kind of world. I’m proud of the role we played for peace in Northern Ireland. I’m proud of our renewed efforts in Africa. I’m proud of what we did in the Balkans, in Kosovo and Bosnia, to stop ethnic cleansing. We did the right thing. I’m glad we’re still struggling to try to build peace in the Middle East through this very difficult period that’s taken a lot of our minds and hearts, those of us who have been working on this for the last 8 years.

But that’s another thing I want to say. The African-American community should, in my judgment, support America’s increasing ties to the rest of the world in a positive way because we are an immigrant nation. Every one of us came here from somewhere else, except the Native Americans, and even their ancestors at one time probably crossed the Bering Straits when it was all land. We all got here from somewhere else.

And so, I asked you to come here today because this is an unusual election season for us. In my lifetime, we have never had an opportunity to go to the polls with so much peace, so much prosperity, with the absence of domestic crisis or looming foreign threat. So we actually are required, all of us, to kind of look inside ourselves and say, what are our dreams here; what is really at stake here; does it matter whether I and all my friends vote here?

And I wanted you to come here just to say, you know, I’m not running for anything—[laughter]—but I don’t believe there’s been an election where it was any more important to vote,

because the American people, in a fundamental sense in this season, are free to chart their own future. And all the best stuff is still out there.

You know, we’re going to have young women bringing babies home from the hospital within a couple years with a life expectancy of 90 years because of the human genome project. You’ll get your little card, tell you what your kid’s gene map is like, what your child’s problems are going to be, and the following 10 things you can do to dramatically increase your child’s life expectancy.

We’re going to have older people—already if you live to be 65, your life expectancy is 82 years. We’re going to have older people able to cure Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, roll back some kinds of cancer, even, that we can’t deal with now. It’s going to be astonishing. But we’re also going to have all our medical and financial records on somebody’s computer somewhere, and we’ve got to figure out how we set up a system so we get to say yes before somebody looks at them. These are big issues.

And the thing that I would like to say about the Vice President is that, after 8 years, I know he makes good decisions. I know he has good values, and I know he understands the future. He thinks about this stuff all the time. And that’s very, very important. Senator Lieberman I’ve known for 30 years, and I feel the same way about him. But this is an election in which the American people—they don’t have to really believe anything hateful about anybody that is running. Maybe some people find that boring. I think it’s wonderful. [Laughter] You can actually say, “Look, we got all of these good people running for office who love their families, and they love their country, and they will do their very best to do the right thing. It’s what they believe.”

So you’ve just got to decide what you believe. But you cannot afford to let the opportunity of maybe more than a generation, maybe 50 years—it may be 50 years before we have another election like this. On the other hand, we could have another one just like this in 4 years, if we do the right thing now—if we do the right thing now.

I think of the first Presidential campaign I took a part in, in 1968. It was an agony; 1972, when I met Eddie Bernice Johnson, it was an agony; 1976, we were full of hope, but there were also a lot of problems in the country; 1988, the country was in the dumps again; 1984, it

was morning in America, but as my Senator, Dale Bumpers, used to say, if you let me write \$200 billion worth of hot checks every year, I could show you a good time, too. *[Laughter]* And so eventually the chickens came home to roost there.

We've got a good thing going here. But shame on us if we don't thank God for our good fortune and tell everybody how important it is to make a decision. And believe me, not showing up is a decision, and it's the wrong decision. Not showing up is a decision, and it's the wrong decision.

So I just wanted you to come here today so I could tell you that I think it's important that you, and anybody you can talk to, go out into the community and say, "Look, it might be 50 years before we get a deal like this again, and here is what I think is at issue: How do you keep the prosperity going; how do you build on the progress; how do you build one America, keep on doing that; and how do we prepare for the future and do these big things?" It's really, really important.

Lastly, depending on the makeup of the Congress, it's important that somebody be here that stops some of the more extreme things that would have happened if I hadn't had the great good fortune, thanks to so many of you, to be standing here in the way of some things, as well as trying to get some things going.

So I just want to—I have learned—one of the reporters asked me earlier today if I really thought it was bad that I had had to work and hadn't been out on the campaign trail, and I said, "No, I'm not running, and I shouldn't have been out before now." And I'm actually probably the only person in the room that's been on the other end of this deal, because I remember when President Reagan came to Arkansas in 1984, and he was more popular than you can imagine down there. And we both did just fine in the elections, so—*[laughter]*—if you get my drift.

I don't seek to tell anybody how to vote, but I do seek to say, based on my experience—because everybody knows who I'm for—but based on my experience, which unfortunately is getting longer every year, I don't know when we'll ever have another time like this. I've done everything I could to turn this country around, to pull this country together, to move our country forward. But we've got this huge opportunity here, that we can literally paint a picture of the future and make it happen, if we keep the prosperity going, instead of put it at risk by going into deficit; if we build on the progress of the last 8 years, instead of reverse those policies which brought it; if we keep working to build one America; and then if we take home the big challenges of the future.

I just think, if you go out and tell people that, tell young people that, they will understand what is at issue, and they will show up. And in a free society, that's all any of us can ask: Show up. Know what the differences are; have clarity on that. Make your decision, and the rest of us will happily embrace it. I think it will be quite a good decision if we get everybody there.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:58 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Alvin Brown, Senior Adviser to the Vice President for Urban Affairs; Jena Roscoe, Associate Director of Public Liaison, White House Office of African-American Outreach and Youth; John J. Johnson, director, National Programs Department, NAACP; Norman Hill, president, A. Philip Randolph Institute; Wade Henderson, executive director, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights; Yvonne Scruggs-Leftwich, executive director and chief operating officer, Black Leadership Forum, Inc.; Weldon H. Latham, senior partner, Holland and Knight, and general counsel, National Coalition of Minority Businesses; and former Senator Dale Bumpers.